

## **Afghans Accuse Pakistan of Obstructing Trade**

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New agreement should have eased import-export traffic via Pakistan, but Afghans say that hasn't happened.

Afghan traders say that despite an agreement designed to help them move freight through Pakistan, consignments of goods for import and export are still being held up in that country.

Afghanistan and Pakistan signed a new transit trade deal in October 2010, although it did not start being implemented until summer 2011 because of disagreements over bank guarantees for Afghan goods. That was resolved when the United State provided Kabul with five million US dollars to cover the guarantees.

Although the agreement allows the free passage of goods in transit, Afghan exporters say the Pakistani authorities are continuing to prevent trucks moving through the country, with hundreds stopped in the northwest city of Peshawar.

Currently, Afghan trucks carrying goods destined for the Indian market have to stop in Peshawar and unload there, and Pakistani vehicles carry the freight onwards. Afghan traders and officials would naturally prefer their own vehicles to be able to drive straight through Pakistan to the Indian border.

Landlocked Afghanistan is heavily dependent on neighbouring states for trade, and Pakistan's access to the sea makes it a key partner. But the relationship is a troubled one, with Kabul accusing Islamabad of giving sanctuary to Taliban insurgents.

Some observers believe Pakistan is deliberately using trade to pressure Afghanistan. Mohammad Qurban Haqqi, chief executive of the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries, said this had long been the case.

"Pakistan uses transit agreements as leverage for exerting pressure on Afghanistan, so we don't believe the problem will be solved even after cash guarantees have been paid," he said.

A source at Pakistan's embassy in Kabul, who asked to remain anonymous, told IWPR that the guarantees were needed to ensure that Afghan traders in transit travelled along predetermined routes and did not sell their goods or sell their trucks inside Pakistan.

The source added that Pakistani president Asif Ali Zardari had given Afghans a grace period of three months to enter Pakistan without furnishing guarantees, and Prime Minister Yusuf Reza Gillani had extended this to six months.

However, Khan Jan Alokzay, deputy head of the Afghan chamber of commerce, said that in practice, this right had been extended to only 40 trucks, while another 300 carrying goods for export were still stuck in Peshawar.

Alokzay said import goods were also being blocked for months on end – in this case at the port of Karachi.

"As a result of obstacles created by the Pakistani government, 4,000 to 4,500 truckloads of [import] goods are held up in Karachi right now," he said. "Pakistan is not allowing traders to bring them into Afghanistan. And the Pakistani government has imposed additional taxes and tariffs of between 3,000 and 10,000 US dollars on each of the containers."

Afghan trade minister Anwar ul-Haq Ahadi told a press conference in Kabul, "If essential items are not brought from Pakistan, prices will go up and people will face many challenges".

Kabul resident Mirza Mohammad suggested this was already happening. "When I go to the shop to buy something, I see that prices are higher than the day before. The shopkeepers say their goods haven't arrived from Pakistan."

Afghans find the restrictions particularly unfair as Pakistani traders are given much greater freedom to operate in Afghanistan.

Some want firmer action against Islamabad, while others say the solution is to reduce dependence on Pakistan by rerouting more trade through Iran, which also has maritime access, or by land through the Central Asian states to the north.

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